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A Love story

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Abstract

When Philip wakes again it is dayhght; as window, wash-basin, chair and then rucksacks swim into focus, this time he knows where he is: in a room in a pensione in Florence, just a stone's throw from the bridge where Dante saw Beatrice, exams over, his girl beside him. Three months of travelling. Seeing. Voyage to Discovery. New World fmds Old. He turns his head; Alvie is still asleep. Sitting up carefully, he watches a pulse ticking in her neck. Her skin is pale, winter-pale, but across the pillow her hair is a copper fire. She has used the rinse she bought to try out her phrase book Italian. Her lips move; she is smiling. At what, he wonders, sliding out of the bed. What?

A Love Story

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(i) LEGEND

When Philip wakes again it is daylight; as window, wash-basin, chair and then rucksacks swim into focus, this time he knows where he is: in a room in a pensione in Florence, just a stone's throw from the bridge where Dante saw Beatrice, exams over, his girl beside him. Three months of travelling. Seeing. Voyage to Discovery. New World finds Old. He turns his head; Alvie is still asleep. Sitting up carefully, he watches a pulse ticking in her neck. Her skin is pale, winter-pale, but across the pillow her hair is a copper fire. She has used the rinse she bought to try out her phrase book Italian. Her lips move; she is smiling. At what, he wonders, sliding out of the bed. What?

Shivering in the cool of late autumn, he pulls on jeans and skivvy and, lifting the chair over to the window, opens his notebook. What he reads there doesn't seem too bad, quite good in fact. Before she wakes up he will have another go at it, see if this morning he can't pin down in verse all the dazzle of paint, the curve and gleam of marble that has made him feel drunk — stoned — feverish since he stepped off the plane back in Rome.

He glances across at Alvie; her eyelids flutter. Stay asleep darling, he begs. Let me get this right first. Alvie is a bit terse sometimes about his notebook — a habit grown out of all that solitariness, a whole four-fifths of his life actually, so long he used to think being alone was fate's lot for him. She says it's an obsession, this need to get it right. Just dash off a few impressions she says, the rest will come later, you know it will. Stop *worrying* Phil. Relax. Take a deep breath. Take more photos — they'll bring it all back. Or postcards — buy postcards like me. And she flicks through things that have caught her eye: a fountain in Rome that they came upon unexpectedly at the end of a long day when they were on the edge of quarrelling; and that statue of the naked boy about to kiss his girl; nice that, she says, Love hugging his Psyche...

What she doesn't understand, broods Philip, hunched up under the window, is that it's not simply a matter of making notes of everything like some indiscriminate camera. No. That isn't bothering him. It's the shape within all the shapes and colours — *that's* what keeps eluding him.

He looks down at his notes. It's no good, the words won't move, they lie shrivelled and limp. His head begins to thump. He feels chilled right through. Dropping the notebook he goes to his rucksack and drags out a thick winter shirt, then gives the rucksack a great shove across the floor.

Alvie mumbles; opens her eyes. 'Up already?'

'It isn't exactly early.'

'What's eating you?'

'I've got a headache.'

'Bad? How bad?'

'It's like those snakes wound around old man Laocoön,' he tells her, rather pleased with that, glancing across at her as he buttons his cuffs.

She laughs. 'It's probably all that Chianti you've been drinking. You want to watch it, Phil.' She yawns, stretches, pushes her hair off her face. Pulling a blanket around herself she comes across to the window. 'Want me to rub your head?'

'Yes please.' Head against her breast he tells her, 'When I woke up in the middle of the night I couldn't remember where I was. It was horrible.' It is the ghost of a childhood terror: waking to a darkness that gave him back nothing but his screams until alarmed, impatient, blinking as she switched on his light, his mother would rush in.

Alvie's fingertips on his temples move in slow firm circles. 'You soon remembered,' she says drily.

'You smell good,' he murmurs, breathing in a mixture of sleepiness and yesterday's sweat and the ardour of his pre-dawn clinging.

She laughs again. 'So do you. Maybe that's it — compatible whats-its-

names.' His hands take in the familiar sharpness of her hip bones, the smoothness of skin. Her thighs part slightly. She says 'Where are we off to today, Phil — the Accademia, is it? What's so funny?'

'You. Saying that. Where are we off to today. Remember that first holiday you spent at my father's when we were kids and I was supposed to be showing you the sights of Melbourne?' Like wine there courses through him memories of that frantic two weeks; those old things he loved that he wanted to show her, and the first time she touched him (it was outside the Museum), and the kisses and fondling that nearly sent him crazy until on the very last night of her visit she said yes to him, (he cleaned his teeth first, he remembers), a scared kid discovering with her what other kids sniggered about and poets sang about and his parents wrecked up his childhood fighting about. And himself? She had whispered 'Quick get something, anything, yes your singlet'll do' because she was bleeding, loving her he had made her bleed but she hadn't cared, she'd said 'Don't be shocked Philip, I'd rather it was you than anyone' and he had cried with the joy of her.

'I remember.' The blanket slips from her shoulders as she waves her hand at their pile of guide books and mementoes. 'So here we are. So what's new.'

He looks at her, sees the delicacy of marble. An idea hits him. 'That statue of Apollo pursuing Daphne in that gallery in Rome — you know, the one by Bernini —' They had walked around it for ages, marvelling at the desperation the sculptor had caught, the cry for help, the youthful arms outstretched, the swirling cloak covering the lust doomed to marble imprisonment forever as the nymph's flesh turns to wood at his touch.

'The leech with the hots for the leafy lady — that one?'

It's the poet clutching at his muse, he thinks excitedly. Scooping up his notebook and scrawling 'Bern's Ap → Daph = me → inspiration', he tells her 'I know exactly how frustrated that poor bugger felt!'

For a moment she stares at him, then pulling on her tracksuit and snatching up towel and soap she retorts 'Oh you do, do you? Just what *do* you think happened when you woke me up at four o'clock this morning?'

But whether she is offended or pretending he's not sure because when he starts to explain what he meant she shuts him up with one of her kisses, and when he grabs her towel to pull her onto the bed with him she turns it into a wrestling match which she wins by escaping into the passage.

(ii) ODALISQUE

Breakfast in the pensione is served until nine.

It is now twenty past.

Philip, arranging his damp shirt on a hanger by the window, says 'It's hardly worth going down, is it?' but Alvie, pulling a comb once through her wet hair, jangles the room key at him, saying 'Come *on*, we're paying aren't we?'

On the stairs maids are bundling heaps of linen. 'Permesso!' she calls, bounding past them. 'Bon jerno! Kommy star? Permesso!' '*Bon giorno, bon giorno!*' he echoes, relishing her easy warmth with strangers but wincing at her accent. In the dining room doorway they pause. The room is almost empty, the other guests well on their way to the Uffizi or the Ponte Vecchio by now. A waitress glances at them then goes on shaking cloths and laying clean cutlery.

She nudges him. 'Me dispee-archie,' she mews plaintively, then drops her head to her folded hands in a parody of sleeping. 'Troppo! Troppo!' She nudges him again triumphantly as the waitress, sighing, waves them to a table by the window. 'Wow! Just look at that sunshine, will you!' she exclaims, pulling the lace curtain aside so that he sees a brightening in the grey sky. 'We're dead lucky, aren't we?' She peers at him around a fold of the curtain, her eyes round. 'What if someone...?' They burst out laughing. Under the table her feet find his.

He glances around the room. Is the waitress grinning? Is that disgust crossing the faces of the middle-aged couple whose eye he catches? He looks down at his hands, momentarily convinced that what he still feels in his fingertips, his joints, along all his senses, must be apparent to everyone — his hurrying with her towel to the shower cubicle at the end of the corridor and finding the door ajar because the lock doesn't catch and her saying 'Oh it's *you*, is it?' goggling her eyes at him around the plastic curtain then catching his shirt sleeve and trying to pull him into the shower recess with her, laughing at his protests as his clean shirt gets soaked, and then the two of them together in the shower fighting over the miserable trickle of hot water, feet skidding on the mouldy floor, hip bones jostling, her body slippery with soap, tasting of soap, opening to his urgency as though it's five years not five hours since they last made love, water spraying everywhere and should someone barge in only the greasy plastic shower curtain dividing love from indecency.

The waitress brings two rolls and two pastries to their table. 'Go on,' Alvie says, biting into one of them. 'Eat up, they'll be giving us the shove in a minute.'

‘Coffee? Tea?’ the waitress asks.

‘Kaffay con lattay,’ she replies, indicating him. It’s something they agreed on before they left home: to use their little bit of Italian wherever they could; they’d feel part of the place then; it would be more fun. ‘*Si, un caffè con latte,*’ he repeats. ‘*Per favore.*’ But while he struggles to find the correct word, the correct way to hold his mouth, she slams the phrase book shut and plunges on. She points to herself. ‘Daisy dayro ... daisy dayro tay con lattay freddo. *Freddo!*’ she emphasizes. ‘I can’t stomach tea with hot milk,’ she tells him, and she pulls another of her faces, looking to him to laugh with her — but at what? at funny foreign customs? at herself for being so pigheaded over cold milk in the cup first? He isn’t sure. But laughs anyway, because looking at her he is reminded of a plant his stepmother grows in a sunny garden bed, a joyous plant all pinks and reds and golds amongst the dark green leaves of its neighbours. It catches him with a shock of gladness each time he passes it. Love-lies-bleeding, his stepmother calls it. Philip prefers *amaranthus*, a name he looked up in the dictionary once because he liked the sound of it: *amaranth, an imaginary unfading flower*. Watching Alvie now as she drowns a spoonful of brown sugar then chews it, the sort of silly thing you remember years later about people, he thinks excitedly love is like that plant, not imaginary meaning unreal but *imagined, of the imagination* — five minutes fucking somewhere, bedroom, bathroom, each moment gone as it’s happening but the joy of it lasting, shaped in your mind the way all the canvas and stone we’ve been looking at these last few days has been worked on, shaped: a glimpse of the unimaginable.

‘Maybe we should catch a bus,’ she is saying, leaning over the table to look at his watch. Her own watch is probably on the floor somewhere upstairs, one of her careless, carefree habits. ‘If we don’t sit down for a cappuccino maybe we can afford a bus?’

‘Yes,’ he says, concentrating on the spoon he is turning in his cup. He wants her again. When they go upstairs to clean their teeth he will have her again. And there rises the certainty that from all the notes, bits of verse, impressions filling page after page of his notebook he will shape a poem more erotic than anything he has yet tried, a poem as voluptuous as worked marble, as sensual as Titian’s Venus yesterday, the glowing flesh turned in love to whoever looked at her, as unfading as an imaginary flower.

(iii) MADONNA

'It'll be good,' he tells her as they climb onto the crowded bus. 'It'll be different.' Alvie pulls him towards two seats about to be vacated. 'It'll combine everything I've felt about all this — this —' And he gestures widely to indicate: *everything*. Words spin into his mind. He begins to juggle phrases. So absorbed is he, staring into the aisle at nothing, that it is Alvie who sees them first. 'Look!' she says, nudging him. 'That cap on that girl — isn't it great?'

He looks. Along the narrow medieval footpath, walking in the same direction as the slow-moving bus, come two girls wearing jeans and leather jackets, sisters perhaps, one about twelve who is talking, gesticulating, skipping around people in her way, the other older, taller, her fair hair falling to her shoulders from under her Mao cap, and her hands as calm as her still, grave face. Where have they come from? Perhaps they live in one of these ancient jutting houses. If it were not for their clothes, he thinks, looking from one to the other as they catch up with the bus, they might have stepped out of a fifteenth century painting. The bus crawls past, then stops altogether. Horns toot. Ahead he can see a policeman waving his arms. He looks back at the girls, and sees a youth carrying a satchel and a rolled-up tube of paper approach the older girl and speak. She stops. *The Angel Gabriel at the Annunciation*, he thinks. The Angel Gabriel unrolls his scroll of paper and displays it. He has long dark hair and a soft cap like an upturned plant pot — 'like the cap we saw in that painting yesterday!' Philip exclaims. 'That Lippi self-portrait, remember?' Painted by the artist-son of an artist-priest and the nun Lucretia... 'Fra Filippo Lippi used to hop out of his monastery at night and rage around Florence — along this street maybe, Alvie!' He cranes across her.

She breathes into his neck 'Some guy, that Filippo. Looking for inspiration, was he? ... I got a postcard of his Madonna, Phil,' she adds, sitting up. 'You know, the one with the little angel peeking over his shoulder?'

'Did you? It's lovely, isn't it?' Lucretia was probably the model for that painting. Philip likes to think so anyway. He sees the priest at his easel, splotches of paint on his black garb, capturing forever the girl he has smuggled into his cell. Look at the Christ-Child, he tells them. You must all look at the Christ-Child. Lucretia, dazed with his kisses, folds her quivering hands and lowers her eyes, but one of the little Angels won't keep his head still...

It's Fra Filippo out there and he wants to paint her. The youth and the girl

confer earnestly. As the youth takes more papers from his satchel the younger girl, the little sister, looks from one to the other with, well not a smirk exactly, smirk's a bit coarse —

At last the girl gives back the sheets of paper, reluctantly Philip thinks, and the youth rolls them up again. Fastening his satchel he goes on his way. Just then the bus lurches forward through a gap in the traffic, and Philip's last sight of them is of the little sister laughing outright, and the girl glancing over her shoulder at God's messenger, curious and secretly pleased —

'Dirty postcards, I bet,' says his Madonna, shoving him in the ribs with her elbow.

(iv) THE SLAVES

Hunching their shoulders, they cross the piazza. It is weather for moving briskly, but two middle-aged women in black have stopped to chat under the bare trees, their hands in fingerless gloves, bread and vegetables clutched in their arms. Their laughter rings like metal. A few people, off-season tourists like Alvie and Philip perhaps, are gazing up at the facade of the great church, or poring over maps. Pigeons fly down to a child who is scattering a few crumbs. At the rapid approach of a black-robed priest, his heavy cross swinging, the pigeons fly up in a swoop of wings, then settle again hungrily. One white pigeon, however, does not fly down with the others but flaps and whirrs between the trees in a dazzle of white wings. As it turns gracefully above their heads Alvie cries 'Oh look, Phil!' then laughs out loud as it comes to land in front of the child, a plastic wind-up toy. 'I thought it was *real*!' And she links her arm in his and squeezes, a gesture that says Aren't I silly and isn't that bird silly and isn't all this *fun*?

As they get closer to the child scattering crumbs, Philip notices a very tall, very thin black man approaching. With one long arm the man scoops up the bird then stands quite still, not speaking to the child who has begun to stalk a real pigeon — not speaking to Alvie or Philip either, hardly looking at them in fact, but by the way he is standing as aware of them as they are of him. His thin black fingers caress the plastic toy. It is one of those moments, Philip thinks, one of those moments that means more than itself, the women's conversation that I can almost understand and the child hunting and the black man with the white bird, waiting. I'll buy it for Alvie as a memento, for fun.

As he hesitates, adding up lire in his head, he hears an Australian voice saying 'Jesus, this world!' Turning, he finds a young man with a rucksack standing just behind him. 'He does that every day,' says the stranger, giving a nod towards the black man. 'Him and dozens of others like him all over Europe. Haven't you seen them? They're slaves — yes, slaves,' he repeats at Alvie's startled look. 'There's a boss man somewhere around, he brings these people into the country and provides the bits of plastic and a shed for them to doss down in, and out they go, every day, tourists or no tourists, trying to earn a few cents because they're all wanting to get back home, especially now that winter's coming on and winter in Europe's not much fun if you come from a warm place but they haven't got a hope, they'll never earn their fare back again, the best they can hope for is enough to eat and a place to sleep and if they don't manage to sell any the boss man kicks them out and they starve.'

On hearing this Philip thinks, I couldn't bear that bird now, I'll just *give* him the money. But as he struggles in his mind for the right words in Italian, *I want ... I do not want*, the black man abruptly launches the plastic toy into the air and follows it to the other side of the piazza, and the opportunity is lost.

'We're off to see David,' Alvie is saying to the stranger. 'The Accademia's just around the corner.'

The stranger nods. 'Me too. I'll tag along with you.' He shrugs his shoulders to ease the rucksack decorated with a blue and white Eureka flag, that symbol of freedom. He looks as though he's been travelling a long time. His boots are worn down to the uppers, his jeans in tatters, Philip observes, glancing down at his own neat jeans bought for this trip. His untrimmed beard and his hair tangling onto his shoulders make Philip think of a satyr, one of those hairy half-human creatures of woods and fields that he and Alvie have been looking at in dozens of paintings and sculptures over the last few days. Marsyas, he thinks. The satyr Marsyas — the one that painters loved because he challenged the god Apollo and got skinned alive. He hears Marsyas tell Alvie 'David was carved out of the one big block of stone. They say that when Michelangelo looked at it he could see David there in it, waiting to get out.'

'Is that so?' exclaims Alvie, opening her eyes wide — and Philip raises his eyebrows to himself, since it was only yesterday that Alvie herself read that bit of information out loud from a guide book in a book shop.

Philip stands for a long time in front of Michelangelo's first Slave, one of four in this gallery, marvelling at the anguished effort in the powerful shoulders and stomach muscles as the imprisoned man struggles against

his bondage of stone. Michelangelo never finished it, Philip thinks, but it looks just right the way it is — the figure trapped, straining, not whole yet, desperate to stand free like the David.

He looks around to tell Alvie ... and sees that she has already finished looking at the four Slaves, and not only the Slaves but the highlight of the gallery, David standing in the floodlit niche. She is slouching with her back to the Pietà of Michelangelo's old age, the one Philip read makes an interesting comparison with the highly polished one in the Vatican. She is talking to the stranger.

Moving closer he hears her saying in the bantering tone that annoys her when other women use it to men: 'Okay, so Jesus's legs are deliberately sculpted all rough, not even the same length, so you tell me why.'

'Because Michelangelo was in a hurry, he was afraid he might die before he finished,' Philip puts in quickly.

The stranger glances at him. 'When people were crucified, hanging there was such agony they used to push up with their feet against the nail to get a few seconds' relief, so the soldiers would come around with clubs and break their legs so that they couldn't.'

'God!' Alvie exclaims. 'Why are people so *vile* to one another? ... Did you know that?'

Philip shakes his head. 'Have you had a good look at the David?' he asks as she makes to move towards the door.

The stranger, turning with her, says over his shoulder, 'Take a look at David from the side. There's real apprehension on his face. You don't get that on the postcards.'

Philip catches Alvie's eye. 'Come and look?'

'No. You.' She glances back at the half-formed torsos and the beaten corpse. 'I'm going outside for a bit.'

He shrugs, and takes longer than he means to over the rest of the sculpture. When he comes out of the gallery he finds her sitting alone on the steps.

'Let's go.'

'Hang on,' she says. 'I'm minding his rucksack.'

He notices it then, the grimy worn rucksack with the Eureka flag. 'Is *he* still hanging around?'

'What's eating you?'

He says nothing to that, just sits beside her on the cold step and watches the black man throwing the plastic pigeon.

'This one,' Alvie says, peering in through the window of the locanda. 'All the people in here look like locals.' An elderly waiter escorts them to a table and pulls out their chairs with a flourish. Alvie, laughing up at the man, insists on giving the three orders in her atrocious Italian. Three, because the stranger is still tagging along. Marsyas. The satyr with the Eureka flag. When Philip said to Alvie on the gallery steps 'So let's get something to drink. Okay?' *he* said as he hoisted up his rucksack, 'Good idea. What about something a bit more substantial?'

Philip mentally calculates lire again. One good meal a day. And a bottle of wine. He sees Eureka Flag top up his glass — tops up his own.

Eureka Flag is telling Alvie that he's on his way home. Back to an Australian summer. He's been wandering around Europe for months.

'I suppose you've been in every gallery and cathedral,' Philip says enviously. It's the first thing he has said to him.

The guy says no he hasn't, as a matter of fact this is the first gallery he's bothered with, but he thought he'd better see something to tell his family. He doesn't go for this sort of thing as a rule, there are too many terrible things going on in the world to be wasting his time in old tombs and churches, we might all be blown up tomorrow the way things are heading.

'All the more reason,' Philip replies, warming to the debate, 'For seeing all this before it disappears ... It doesn't seem logical not to,' he continues eagerly. 'I mean, here are all these marvellous things around you that have inspired people for centuries — ordinary people I mean as well as all sorts of artists — and either way you're going to miss out, aren't you? Either by being blown up, which might not happen anyway, or by worrying yourself silly beforehand —' And he gives him a rundown on all the things he's missing right here in Florence, the Loggia for instance, an open-air museum full of statues of old Greek legends, Hercules breaking a Centaur's neck, and the Rape of someone, two rapes actually, and Perseus with the head of Medusa. And the Baptistry doors — he mustn't miss the Baptistry doors, especially Ghiberti's, Paradise and murder and wrath and punishment in ten bronze panels.

Eureka Flag leans forward. 'Centuries of it, right? See, I've got this theory —'

'And the Cathedral,' Philip interrupts, splashing wine into their glasses. (Alvie puts her hand across hers.) 'The Cathedral — there's another Pietà there, a polished one like the one in the Vatican.' He racks his brain for something to cap the other's comment about the Pietà they saw this morning.

‘What have you been doing?’ Alvie asks.

He replies that he’s just been to Germany for the autumn peace demonstrations. He was with the people blockading one of the American missile bases. When they started the blockade no one knew whether the police would play it low key or get heavy. Boy, water cannons are no joke!

‘It doesn’t seem like you’ve been having much of a fun time overseas,’ Alvie comments, wrinkling up her nose. And she smiles at him. Chin propped on one hand. Smiling.

‘Or achieving anything much,’ Philip adds, turning to order more wine.

‘Wrong!’ says the guy. ‘People like you two should go along to a demonstration sometime. See for yourselves. At the missile base for instance. Boy, was that something! All those blockaders working together, *caring* for each other, it’s the only way, getting together, showing other people, it’s true what old J.C. said (not that I’m religious or anything like that), Wherever two or three are gathered together — like the three of us, say. That’s all it takes because before long two or three more will join in and soon you’ll have a crowd, you’ll have a whole city, a nation — all because of two or three. Only they’ve got to care, that first bunch, they’ve got to get rid of all the fear inside themselves, all the anger, they’ve got to love one another —’ He smiles apologetically. ‘Have you noticed how easy it is to say you hate something, I hate the unions, but if you start on about love everyone thinks you’re some sort of nutter?’

Alvie says ‘I love Ronald Reagan,’ and laughs.

Philip tries to catch her eye: *We love each other.*

At that moment their meal arrives.

‘That was quick,’ Eureka Flag comments. He grins at Alvie. ‘It helps all right if you know the language.’

Alvie gives a little shrug of pleasure, a quick tightening of the shoulders like a hug. ‘And if you’re a woman,’ Philip smirks.

‘Oh rubbish!’ Alvie says. ‘They just like you to try.’

Philip lifts his glass and studies the dark red wine. ‘Especially if you’re a woman,’ he repeats, watching sideways as the colour runs into her face. He says softly, ‘It wouldn’t matter how badly you said it.’

Get stuffed! Alvie breathes.

Eureka Flag is saying ‘Great nosh-up, this. If I hadn’t found you guys I’d have just grabbed a pizza somewhere.’ He says are they going to Germany, he can give them the name of friends to stay with in Germany, they’re great people, they live in a huge old converted barn so there’s

heaps of room, they'll make Alvie and Philip welcome in Germany.

'Sounds great!' Alvie says. 'Phil?'

'Are we going to Germany?' Philip responds in what comes back to him as the thin sarcastic tone he hasn't heard in years, his father's to his mother, before they split up. So he says hastily, 'Yes, the Loggia — he must see the Loggia, mustn't he, Alvie? — and just a few steps away there's David again.' 'A replica,' Alvie explains. 'The small force against the evil in the world!' Philip declaims, flourishing his glass. He adds 'With bird shit on his head!' And laughs.

For a moment Alvie stares at him like a mother or something, then turns back to her plate. 'How's yours?' she asks the other guy. 'Want to try some of mine?' They exchange spoonfuls. Philip shrieks with silent laughter when a gob of pasta catches in his beard.

'Philip?'

'No thanks. I'm happy with what I've got.'

'Well — can I have a taste, then?' Alvie persists. Philip shrugs, and pushes his plate across the table. She asks, concentrating on her fork, 'Do you have brothers and sisters back home?' The guy's face lights up. Two sisters and a brother, he tells her. 'Uhuh,' says Alvie, nodding. She says 'My Aunt Trudi's a teacher — you know? And she reckons you can always tell the kids without any brothers and sisters the day they come to school. They never want to lend their coloured pencils.'

'Is that so?' says Philip.

(vi) COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE

Then Philip, emptying the bottle into his glass, hears himself saying so heartily that Alvie starts staring again, 'So what are we all doing the rest of this afternoon? You could go to the Uffizi, mate, but it'll be closing time soon, and if you want to stick with us why don't we just walk around in the centre of town?' and Spaghetti Beard says 'Great, mate!' so they're landed with him for the rest of the day. Philip, hogging the guide book, shouts 'The Loggia! Let's start with the Loggia!' but Marsyas the rebel jumps to his feet shouting 'No, Paradise — that's where it all started, mate, all the aggro!'

'Alvie?' says Philip.

Alvie sits scraping up the dregs of her cappuccino with her spoon. Suddenly she bursts out 'So where's it all getting us? That's what I'd like to know! All this cruelty, snakes crushing people, men racing off women

or fighting half-horse things, Judith cutting off some guy's head I don't know how many times, some poor young guy shot full of arrows and looking *pleased* about it for Chrissake! — It's horrible, horrible, I don't care if I never see another bleeding Jesus!

They are silent for some minutes then. She goes on scraping the bottom of her cup until Philip has to stop himself reaching over and taking it from her because when he was a child his mother would never let him do that.

'Let's go back to the big square,' suggests their companion. 'There's usually something happening in the squares, even at this time of year.' Street theatre, he tells them — he was into a bit of street theatre himself with the peace movement. Sure enough, in the piazza people are gathering around a young woman who has lighted some sort of flare in a tin and is blowing bubbles. Flickering light catches at the bubbles as they float off into the dusk. Two or three children run with upstretched arms. Suddenly the woman puts down the bubble pipe and reaching out catches one, two, three, four bubbles and begins to juggle them, her eyes dark pits in her uplifted face. A murmur runs through the crowd. Somebody claps. At the sound her hands falter. One of the bubbles drops and bounces once, twice on the pavement.

Leaning forward without looking down the woman catches the bubble and tosses it back with the others — gobs of colour pulled together into a pattern of light.

'Oh!' Alvie cries, delighted. 'Now how does she do that?'

It's just what I'm trying to do with words! Philip thinks, or does he shout it, because Alvie and Spaghetti Beard begin to laugh, all around people are laughing, staring at him, and he burns with embarrassment, hearing himself sound pretentious, ridiculous. He hates her for joining in with that fellow in mocking him. He turns away quickly — and sees what they have all been guffawing at. It is not him at all, but a young man behind him, right at his shoulder, another of these street theatre characters, a mimic this time. Philip, turning, catches him leaning forward earnestly, just as Philip must have been leaning, a frightful frown on his face. As he turns the young man jumps away and begins to mince across the piazza behind a woman wearing extraordinarily high heels. Each time the woman half-glances over one shoulder, conscious of something out of place, the mimic steps to the other shoulder, so artful you can see those high heels on his mocking ankles. This time Philip joins in the laughter, even throwing a few hundred lire when the man brings around his cap, but the noise screams in his ears.

'Let's go!' he says as Marsyas moves off to look at the huge white Neptune dominating the piazza. Not yet, Alvie replies. He can if he wants, but there's plenty happening here, she's going to hang about for a bit.

'With him?'

'He's okay. He's nice. You stay too.'

'What for? I can't see anything happening. Come on. I don't want to hang around any more.'

She shrugs his hand off her arm. 'Well maybe I do.'

Marsyas comes back to them. 'You two coming?'

He hovers indecisively. 'I want to do a bit of writing,' he says, looking at Alvie.

'Letters home,' says Marsyas.

He would let it go at that but Alvie says 'No, poems, he writes poems, he's working on something right now but he won't let anyone see till it's finished. He's good,' she adds. 'He gets things published.'

'Only in things no one's ever heard of,' he says modestly.

'What do you write about?'

'Love poems,' Alvie replies as he hesitates, so that he feels himself going red again.

'You should write about real things,' says Marsyas. 'I mean, like what's going on around us in this stuffed up world. The sort of things those guys —' He gestures towards the marble figures in the Loggia — 'have been rabbiting on about for centuries. Only now it's pollution and Pershing missiles. Same thing, isn't it? You're good, she says — you might change something.'

'I'll keep it in mind,' Philip replies, furious with her, with both of them.

Back in the room at the pensione he sits on the bed under the bare globe and on a fresh page of his notebook writes *Art mocks Life*. Or should it be the other way around? *Life stuffs up Art*. Then he sits for a long time tapping the pencil. How can she just wander off till all hours in a foreign city with some yobbo she knows nothing about? *Satyr holds orgy in bed-and-breakfast. Sabine woman seized, rescuer trampled*. He writes *Life* again then sits turning the pencil point in the dot over the i. The minute she sets foot in this room he will grab her, rip off leaves and bark to the heartwood, screw her till she screams, screw that satyr out of her, flay him alive in front of her, shoot her full of arrows, thorns, nails, break her legs —

He begins to write. The pencil races. When he has finished there

appears a poem that leaves him drained and triumphant but is so ugly, so violent that as he rereads it he feels sick. Throwing pencil and notebook onto the floor he crawls into bed. He is awakened later — minutes? hours? — by muffled laughter, the turning of the door handle, more squawks of laughter. ‘Put the light on,’ he says coldly. ‘I’m not asleep.’ The glare almost blinds him but he can make her out, alive with laughter, and behind her, standing in the doorway clutching his rucksack, *him*.

‘He’s got nowhere to sleep,’ she says. ‘He had to vacate his room yesterday morning, so I said he could camp here overnight.’

‘Oh sure,’ he replies. ‘Help yourself. Room in this bed for three. Edge or middle?’

But sarcasm is wasted on *him*. ‘No worries, the floor’s fine by me,’ says the satyr, and begins to unroll a thin grubby mat and a sleeping bag.

She titters again. ‘You should have heard me chatting up the guy on the desk so he wouldn’t notice him sneaking upstairs!’

When he wakes again, head aching, groin aching, it is almost daylight. The intruder has gone. Mat, sleeping bag, rucksack — gone. He turns his head; Alvie is still asleep. As he slides his hand between her thighs she murmurs half-waking and puts her arms around him. When they have made love they turn back to back, their bottoms touching. From the edge of the bed he sees his notebook lying open on the floor, and remembers with amazement his poem of last night — too shameful to show anyone, too good to tear up. As light seeps into the room he can make out several pencilled arrows pointing to something scrawled under his own writing. Leaning out to reach it, he reads *Thanx!* and an address in Germany.